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AUTHOR Reed, W. Michael; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects that writing skills, sex, preparation, and knowledge of the composing process have on writing apprehension. Subjects were 42 male and 42 female high school seniors from rural or small city schools who were considered by their English teachers to be average or above average students. In addition to indicating sex and level of preparation in writing, each subject completed instruments designed to measure writing skills, writing apprehension, and knowledge of the composing process. Results showed that writers with more writing skills were less apprehensive about writing than were students with fewer skills. Other findings showed that the instrument designed to measure knowledge of the composing process was not reliable for females; that contrary to previous findings, males were not more apprehensive than females; and that the number of writing courses a student had taken had a positive relationship with apprehension, with those students taking more courses tending to be more apprehensive than those with fewer courses. (Author/FL)

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The Effects of Writing Skills, Sex, Preparation and Knowledge of the Composing Process on Writing Apprehension

by

W. Michael Reed, Nancy Vandett, & John K. Burton

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400 War Memorial Gym
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(703) 961-5428

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects that writing skills, sex, preparation, and knowledge of the composing process have on writing apprenhension. Eighty-four high school seniors (42 males and 42 females), considered average or above average by their English teachers, at either rural or rural-small city schools were chosen for this study. The results of this study support the previous findings that writing skills decrease writing apprehension: writers with more skills are less apprehensive than writers fewer skills. Three surprising results have come out of this study. First, an instrument designed to measure knowledge of the composing process proved not to be reliable for females (Ø.Ø5). Second, contrary to previous studies, males were not more apprehensive than females. And third, the amount of writing courses has a positive relationship with writing apprehension: students with more preparation tend to be more apprehensive than those with fewer classes. This finding contradicts the intuitive link between the acquisition of writing skills and classes that are taken.

Most educators recognize that certain levels of anxiety are necessary for successful learning. These degrees of apprehension require the learners to focus on the task they are performing, thus making them concentrate more. In fact, this apprehension is often viewed by educators as the degree of challenge a specific task involves (e.g., Wildman & Burton, 1981).

At some point however, apprehension no longer facilitates learning, but impedes it. In composing this anxiety is known as writing apprehension, a "construct associated with a person's tendencies to approach or to avoid situations that require writing accompanied by some form of evaluation" (Faigley, Daly, & Witte, Note 1, p. 1). Shaughnessy (1977) illustrates how a high level of writing apprehension can affect a student's writing: "He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. . . . Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce a few lines per hour" (p. 7).

Writing apprehension has been shown to have long-range implications: the direction of academic preparation ultimately leads to certain types of occupations. Studies have shown that writing apprehension is a factor related to the choice of an academic major or an occupation (Daly & Shamo, 1976; Miller & Daly, Note 2). High apprehensive writers tend to choose academic majors and occupations that they perceive as requiring relatively little writing. Low

apprehensives, on the other hand, actively seek and choose academic majors and occupations that appear to require more writing. In academic settings, high apprehensive writers base their satisfaction in course work on the amount of writing required. Because their expectations of success in writing are low, they often will not enroll in advanced composition courses (Daly & Miller, 1975; Scott & Wheeles, Note 3), thus limiting their majors and ultimately their occupations.

The degree of writing apprehension also affects how a writer approaches a writing task. When compared with low apprehensive writers, high apprehensives write shorter essays, use fewer qualifiers, and choose a lower level of vocabulary and usage (Book, Note 4). They appear to be afraid of making decisions about topics, the amount of information to gather, and generalizing from that information. These anxious writers disrupt their writing processes by performing parts of the process at the wrong times: they edit as they write, proofread continuously and often excessively, and continue adding topics as they go along (Thompson, Note 5).

Some of the effects of writing apprehension are external to the writer and his or her decision-making processes. People establish certain opinions of high apprehensives, which frequently effect certain results that, in turn, generate even more apprehension. Teachers consider high apprehensives as significantly less likely to succeed in a variety of academic subjects than their low anxious counterparts and apparently make this a "self-fulfilling prophesy" (Daly, 1979). For example, once high apprehensives are detected,

essays by high apprehensives are evaluated as lower in overall quality than those written by low apprehensives. Studies indicate that these lower evaluations are, in part, due to the perceptions these evaluators have of these writers rather than just the quality of the writing (Daly, 1977; Faigley, Daly, & Witte, Note 1; Garcia, 1977; Richmond & Dickson, Note 6).

Factors Related to Writing Apprehension

Perhaps the first step in alleviating writing apprehension is to examine some of its causes. Daly (1977) states that poor or negative teacher responses to early writing attempts contribute to this apprehension. Aversive conditioning, poor skill developments, and inadequate role models have also been suggested as contributors to apprehension (Daly, 1979).

Based on the literature, the writer's sex, writing skills, and preparation appear to be major factors of writing apprehension. Daly and Miller (1975) and Dickson (Note 7) found that males are significantly more apprehensive than females. Instructors tend to expect high apprehension in males and low apprehension in females and tend to give lower grades to high anxiety females and low anxiety males (Daly, 1979).

A deficit in skills training has also been shown to be related to writing apprehension (Daly, 1977; Harvley-Felder, 1978; Thompson, Note 8). That is, those writers with low skills tend to be more

apprehensive than writers with better skills. In addition, high apprehension is associated with lower scores on standardized tests of writing aptitude and ability (Daly, 1978; Daly & Miller, 1975; Faigley, Daly, and Witte, Note 1; Richmond & Dickson, Note 6).

Since preparation overlaps with writing skills, the types and number of composition courses a student takes should result in better skills and better skills should result in less apprehension (Thompson, Note 4). Based on several surveys (e.g., Reed, Note 8; Squire & Applebee, 1966), only a small percentage (15 to 19 percent) of entering college freshmen have had courses designed specifically for the learning of composition. In 1974, almost half of the freshman class at the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses of the University of California (which admits only the top 12 percent of California high school students) were required to take a remedial composition course, based on College English Placement Examination (CEEB) scores and a placement essay (Bamberg, 1978). According to Bamberg, the reason for this placement was a lack of instruction, or preparation, in high school. Because instruction would seem to be related to acquiring writing skills and skills decrease writing apprehension, it is logical to assume that if writers with little preparation are more apprehensive than others with more preparation, the amount of preparation might be a factor in the degree of apprehension a writer has.

In addition to the writer's sex, writing skills, and preparation, another factor to consider is the strategies a person uses in a

writing task. A course designed specifically for the teaching of composition would probably include such strategies, but these strategies can also be developed without the student having been instructed on them or how to use them. Based on previously cited survey results, of the 80 percent or more of students who have entered college without such classes, many of them have been able to write essays effectively and successfully. That is, the good grades have not necessarily gone to just those with the high preparation. Because of this possible "self-development," another factor related to writing apprehension is strategies used in the composing process.

These strategies usually involve three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Prewriting involves the generation of ideas for an essay without concern for sentence structure, paragraph development, and other features of writing such as spelling, punctuation, and usage. The writing stage generally involves the logical placement of the content generated during the prewriting stage and more concern for sentence structure and variety, spelling, punctuation, and usage. Rewriting is a more final stage during which the writer works primarily on the "polishing up" features of the essay and begins to make some final decisions about the final product. Fox (1980) found that courses which include the teaching of such strategies decrease writing apprehension.

It appears that when we can determine people's writing skills, preparation history, and knowledge of the composing process, we can predict the amount of apprehension they will most likely have. Once

we determine this information, we can then make decisions about these relationships in an attempt to alleviate the debilitative aspects of writing apprehension.

The specific focus of this investigation, therefore, was on the following research questions:

1) What is the relationship between sex and writing apprehension?

2) What is the relationship between writing skills and writing apprehension?

3) What is the relationship between preparation and writing apprehension?

4) What is the relationship between knowledge of the composing process and writing apprehension?

5) What is the relationship between the composite of sex, writing skills, preparation, knowledge of the composing process, and writing apprehension?

Design of the Study

Instruments

To measure writing skills, a shortened version of the Missouri College English Test (Form B) was administered. For this 68-item instrument, the reliability (KR-20) was 0.84 for both males and females. The students were considered to have low writing skills if they scored one standard deviation or less below the mean, medium writing skills if they scored within one standard deviation above or below the mean, and high writing skills if they scored one standard

deviation or more above the mean.

To measure writing apprehension, the Writing Apprehension Test (Daly & Miller, 1975) was used. The reliability (KR-20) was 0.93 for males and 0.95 for females. The students were considered to be low apprehensive if they scored one standard deviation or less below the mean, medium apprehensive if they scored within one standard deviation above or below the mean, and high apprehensive if they scored one standard deviation or more above the mean.

To measure knowledge of the composing process, the Knowledge of the Composing Process Questionnaire was used. The reliability (KR-20) for males was 0.75 and for females was 0.05. The students were considered to have low knowledge of the composing process if they scored one standard deviation or less below the mean, medium knowledge if they scored within one standard deviation above or below the mean, and high knowledge if they scored one standard deviation or more above the mean.

The students provided information on their sex and level of preparation by responding to a questionnaire developed for this study. Preparation was determined by their responding to statements, choosing the one that best described their past courses in the learning of writing.

Sample

Three intact classes (89 students) at rural and rural-small city high schools in southwest Virginia were selected for this study. Five students were eliminated from this study because of absences on one of the two days of the study. The sample population was comprised of 84 students, 42 males and 42 females. All students were considered to be average, or above average, English students by their English teachers.

Procedures

This study took place over a two-day period. During the first day (45 to 50-minute time block), the students provided information on their preparation and sex and responded to the Writing Apprehension Scale and The Knowledge of the Composing Process Questionnaire. On the second day (also a 45 to 50-minute time block), they took the Missouri College English Test (Form B). All students completed the experimental tasks.

Analysis of the Data

An alpha level of 0.10 was established a priori. Since the research questions dealt with the relationships that writing skills, sex, preparation, and knowledge of the composing process have with writing apprehension, multiple linear regressions were run on the data. A multiple linear regression was run with writing apprehension

as the dependent variable and writing skills, sex, preparation, and knowledge of the composing process as the independent variables. It was hoped that writing apprehension could be predicted based on one's sex, writing skills, preparation, and knowledge of the composing process.

The Knowledge of the Composing Process (KCPQ) proved not to be reliable for females (Ø.Ø5). The reliability (KR2Ø) for males was Ø.75 (see Table 1). Because the instrument proved to be moderately reliable for males, a post hoc multiple regression was conducted for males. For males, the relationship between knowledge of the composing process and writing apprehension proved not to be significant: p = Ø.47 (see Table 4). Because the instrument proved not to be reliable for females, these data were eliminated from the study.

(Insert Table 1)

Results

With the composing process variable eliminated, a multiple regression with writing apprehension as the dependent variable and sex, skills, and preparation as the independent variables was conducted. The distribution of the individual variables was as follows:

VARIABLE	DISTRIBUTION		
Writing Appre.	13(low:0-58)	54(medium: 59-92)	17(high:93-130)
Preparation	25 (low)	42(medium)	17(high)
Writing skills	17(low:0-27)	54(medium: 28-46)	13(high:47-68)

Means and correlations are given in Table 2.

The multiple regression indicated that the independent variables of sex, preparation, writing skills, and knowledge of the composing process taken together were reliable predictors of writing apprehension: $F(3,80) = 2.63$, $p = 0.06$. Subsequent regressions, however, indicated that skills was the only reliable predictor of writing apprehension: $p = 0.01$. Preparation had a p of 0.77, and sex had a p of 0.59. The R squared for this regression was 0.09, indicating that nine percent of the variance in writing apprehension can be attributed to the variables: skills, sex, and preparation. Since preparation and sex were not statistically significant, we can infer that skills contributed mostly to this variance (see Table 3).

(Insert Table 2)

In a post hoc analysis controlling for sex, it was found that, for males, skills was significant ($p = 0.04$) with a R squared of 0.15 (see Table 4). It can be inferred that skills contributed mostly to the variance in writing apprehension for males, since preparation had a p of 0.35 (see Table 4). For females, though, skills had a p of

Ø.Ø6 and preparation had a p of Ø.Ø9 (see Table 5). The R squared was Ø.13. Since the beta weights for both variables were almost equal (Ø.26 for preparation and -Ø.29 for skills), we can infer that, for females, thirteen percent of the variance in writing apprehension can be attributed somewhat equally to both preparation and skills.

(Insert Table 3)

(Insert Table 4)

In summary, there appears to be a strong relationship between skills and writing apprehension: as skills increase, writing apprehension decreases. For females, there appears to be a strong positive relationship between preparation and writing apprehension: as the level of preparation increases, writing apprehension increases. The relationship between sex and writing apprehension did not prove to be significant ($p = Ø.59$); the mean writing apprehension score for males was 75.5 and for females was 74.4. For males, the relationship between preparation and writing apprehension was not reliable ($p = Ø.35$). Although knowledge of the composing process was eliminated as a variable for females because of the instrument's unreliability (Ø.Ø5), a post hoc multiple regression was run on males (the reliability for males was Ø.75); for males, the relationship between knowledge of the composing process and writing apprehension was not significant ($p = Ø.47$).

(Insert Table 5)

Discussion

The Instruments

Of primary concern is the Knowledge of the Composing Process Questionnaire (KCPQ). As stated before, it was found to be moderately reliable for males (Ø.75) but not reliable for females (Ø.Ø5). The score range for males was 52 to 83 and for females, 71 to 81 (see Table 1). For females in this age group (in these particular school systems), the instrument was not able to distinguish between those females who actually are aware of correct writing strategies and those who are not. Perhaps, the instrument was too simple, and a ceiling effect was occurring: the better female writers' scores could not increase because of the level of test items. Another possible explanation is that since the KCPQ is, in some respects, an attitude survey, some of the writers may have responded according to what they felt are the right strategies, rather than what they actually do when they write.

The Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Scale (1975) has a Likert-scale format with the number "3" standing for "uncertain." Because this test is used to determine writing apprehension, it might have resulted faulty placement of students which then confounded the overall results. In this study, 22 students gave #3 answers to seven items or more (out of 26). Of these 22 students, 1Ø could have been

placed in another writing apprehension group had they given a response other than #3. Although the standard deviation would fluctuate to give us the same number of students in each writing apprehension level group in this study, the students and their scores on other instruments would change and would affect results. To insure correct placement, the #3 response should be eliminated so that each student is forced to respond directionally to each item.

The Missouri College English Test (Form B) is divided into three parts: editing skills (identifying spelling, usage, punctuation, and capitalization errors), correct sentence structure (choosing the best-constructed one out of four sentences), and paragraph development (placing five sentences in order so that they make up the best-constructed paragraph possible). The nature of this instrument brings up two points: 1) what happens to the overall score when a students selects a sentence out of place in the paragraph completion section and 2) does the instrument adequately measure what is considered writing skills?

It is possible that if students select a sentence as the first one but it is actually the fifth all sentences would be counted wrong. They may have gotten the other four in the right sequence. Composition instructors know that the topic sentence can occur anywhere in a paragraph, but most of the time it is either the first or last sentence. What may actually happen is that the subject may decide the topic sentence goes at the beginning whereas the test key may designate it to appear at the end, and the subject will miss all

points for that part. If this occurs, the only thing that is happening is a difference of opinion about where the topic sentence should go.

Since the Missouri College English Test does not require a writing sample, whether it actually measures writing skills is open to question. Although the instrument addresses major components of writing skills (the ability to detect spelling, usage, punctuation, and capitalization errors, to choose the best-written sentence, and to determine paragraph development), the inability to transfer "test" grammar to writing execises is not uncommon. Perhaps an answer to this problem is to have the subjects write an essay and have it assessed.

The Results

Of the four independent variables, skills appears to have the most impact on writing apprehension. In fact, with the exception of preparation of females, it is the only variable that is significant: there is a strong relationship between skills and writing apprehension. The beta for skills is -Ø.58 which indicates that for each unit decrease of skills, writing apprehension will increase Ø.58. This finding is in agreement with previous studies (Daly, 1977; Harvley-Felder, 1978; Thompson, Note 7).

Intuitively, it seems that preparation and skills would be related: that, in fact, writers attain writing skills from the courses

they take. That preparation overall is not significant (that in fact there is no relationship between preparation and writing apprehension) is surprising. We would assume that the more courses people take, the more writing skills they would acquire. And, the more skills they have acquired would result in less apprehension, as supported by the relationship between skills and apprehension in this study.

However, for females, preparation is significant for low and medium preparation females ($p = 0.09$). The surprising aspect of this finding though, is that there is a positive relationship between writing apprehension and preparation: that as preparation increases so does writing apprehension (the beta for preparation is 8.47 which means that for each unit increase of preparation, writing apprehension increases almost 8.5 units). This finding contradicts our assumption that preparation and skills are positively related.

This finding also leads us into the very nature of preparation itself. A possible explanation is that even though "better prepared" females have had more opportunities to learn writing skills than "less prepared" females, they have also had more opportunities to have their work evaluated. If the evaluations of their work were negative, they most likely could become more apprehensive. This interpretation may also help to explain some other inequities. Less prepared females, perhaps because of the infrequency of having their work evaluated, were less apprehensive ($\bar{X} = 70$) than their better prepared counterparts ($\bar{X} = 76$).

Possible explanations may be found by looking at the nature of the courses the students have taken and the reasons for their being in those courses. According to Bamberg (1978), composition instruction decreases writing apprehension and improves writing but only under certain conditions: 1) when grammar instruction is applied to writing and 2) when composition instruction includes revision of papers and content-generation stages. Two variables that have failed to result in improved writing performance are writing frequency and teacher evaluation (Burton & Arnold, 1963; Wolf, 1966), but only when they are used in isolation from other components. Writing many essays and having them evaluated without other types of instruction and activities does not decrease writing apprehension (Bamberg, 1978) or help to improve writing (Bamberg, 1978; Burton & Arnold, 1963; Wolf, 1966).

The reason for some students' being in more composition courses needs to be discussed. In some schools, they are often placed in more composition courses, not by their choice, but rather because of poor performance in past writing classes. If this is the case, then on paper they appear to have more preparation but in actuality they may be less proficient at writing than those students who have demonstrated a certain level of mastery earlier and are taking non-composition courses, usually electives. And, if they have been placed in more composition courses, it is very likely that writing apprehension may be maintained at a certain level or even increased. In fact, Powers, Cook, and Meyer (1979) found that compulsory courses

in writing do significantly increase writing apprehension.

Implications

Skills, as in other writing apprehension studies, have a negative relationship with writing apprehension: that as skills increase, writing apprehension decreases. The lingering question is, if skills decrease writing apprehension and preparation (courses) increases writing apprehension (or has no effect), how will writers acquire these skills other than by taking courses? A possible answer is to look at the courses they are taking and the reason for their taking them. Courses implementing sound composition strategies seem to decrease writing apprehension; courses which include the assignment of a topic, turning the paper in, and receiving a graded paper do not offer any instruction on how to improve writing, but generally only information about what is wrong with a paper (Burton & Arnold, 1963; Wolf, 1966). They are usually continuous confirmations of what they've been aware of all along. The fact that they are compulsory probably adds to the apprehension since they are probably not motivated to learn and, thus do not overcome their writing problems. The experience is simply not a positive one.

Another important finding is that males are not more apprehensive than females. Perhaps, this study shows a new trend: males view writing as a valuable skill and, by learning to write better, are less apprehensive.

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Table 1
Knowledge of the Composing Process Questionnnaire: Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability, Standard Error and Range for Males and Females

	Males	Females
Mean	75.62	77.51
Standard Deviation	5.01	2.30
Reliability (KR-20)	0.75	0.05
Standard Error	2.51	2.24
Range	52-83	71-81

Table 2
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Multiple Linear Regression: Writing Apprehension as Dependent Variable and Writing Skills, Sex, and Preparation as Independent Variables

	Correlations			
	SEX	PREP	APPRE	SKILLS
SEX	1.00			
PREP	-0.31	1.00		
APPRE	-0.03	-0.01	1.00	
SKILLS	0.26	0.07	-0.30	1.00

	Mean	Standard Deviation
SEX	1.50	0.50
PREP	1.91	0.71
APPRE	74.93	17.27
SKILLS	36.56	9.24

Table 3
Multiple Linear Regression: Writing Apprehension as the Dependent Variable and Writing Skills, Sex, and Preparation as the Independent Variables

Variable	b	SEb	Beta	T	p
SKILLS	-0.58	0.21	-0.31	-2.80	0.01
PREP	0.82	2.78	0.03	0.30	0.77
SEX	2.13	4.03	0.06	0.53	0.60
(CONSTANT)	91.56	10.35		8.85	0.00

R squared = 0.09
Standard error = 16.78
$F(3,80) = 2.63$, $p = 0.06$

Table 4
Correlations, Means, Standard Deviation, and Multiple Linear Regression for Males: Writing Apprehension as Dependent Variable and Writing Skills, Preparation, and Knowledge of the Composing Process as Independent Variables

Correlations

	PREP	APPRE	SKILLS	PROCESS
PREP	1.00			
APPRE	-0.21	1.00		
SKILLS	0.19	-0.34	1.00	
PROCESS	0.09	-0.10	-0.07	1.00

	Mean	Standard Deviation
PREP	2.12	0.77
APPRE	75.45	16.41
PROCESS	75.43	5.47
SKILLS	34.14	10.13

Multiple Linear Regression

Variable	b	SEb	Beta	T	p
SKILLS	-0.52	0.25	-0.32	-2.08	0.04
PROCESS	-0.33	0.45	-0.01	-0.74	0.47
PREP	-3.08	3.25	0.14	-0.95	0.35
(CONSTANT)	124.76	35.58		3.51	0.00

R squared = 0.15
Standard error = 15.70
$F(3,38) = 2.28$, $p = 0.10$

Table 5
Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Multiple Linear Regression for Females: Writing Apprehension as Dependent Variable and Writing Skills and Preparation as Independent Variables

Correlations

	APPRE	SKILLS	PREP
APPRE	1.00		
SKILLS	-0.26	1.00	
PREP	0.22	0.14	1.00

	Mean	Standard Deviation
APPRE	74.41	18.28
SKILLS	38.98	7.63
PREP	1.70	0.56

Multiple Linear Regression

Variable	b	SEb	Beta	T	p
PREP	8.47	4.89	0.26	1.73	0.09
SKILLS	-0.70	0.36	-0.29	-1.95	0.06
(CONSTANT)	87.46	15.55		5.63	0.00

R squared = 0.13
Standard error = 17.45
F(2,39) = 2.99, p = 0.06